Hearing Voices

A Response to "Case Study of a Participatory Health-Promotion Intervention in School"

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ABSTRACT

Venka Simovska's article "Case Study of a Participatory Health-Promotion Intervention in School" provides important insights regarding the active involvement of youths in service programs. This response essay extends Simovska's discussions and frames them within three key areas: positive youth development, youth voice, and meaningful participation. The paper agrees with Simovska's assertions that more process-centered research is needed to identify and explain what happens within a program that yields positive development. While many youth workers verbally declare that the focus of their programs is the youths they serve, many fail to carry out this claim with their actions. Youth practitioners must seek to create meaningful relationships with program participants and help children become active agents in their own development.

This article is a response to:

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Today's youth workers are presented with increasingly difficult questions regarding how to maximize developmental outcomes. Witnessing a recent history wrought with violent behavior, complacency, and rebellion, the public perception of youths borders on pessimistic at best. Despite this, many selfless and dedicated youth practitioners commit their lives to helping young people develop positively and to promoting a trajectory that will aid each child in growing into a fully functional adult. One of the most effective means for helping children experience positive growth is to help them become active agents in their own development (Lerner, Theokas, & Jelicic, 2005). In her article "Case Study of a Participatory Health-Promotion Intervention in School," Venka Simovska (2012) discusses the qualitative findings of a health-promotion program aimed at creating a partnership between stakeholder groups (i.e., students, school personnel, community members, program staff, policymakers) through meaningful participation to bring about positive health-related changes. This response frames Simovska's findings within the paradigm of positive youth development (PYD) and discusses how its tenets, which are most often associated with out-of-school-time (OST) activities, can be employed by practitioners in a school-based setting. In addition, the notion of youth voice, an integral piece of the PYD framework, is explored as a main driver for Simovska's findings. Finally, I extend Simovska's discussion of meaningful participation to include the concepts of youth empowerment and enduring engagement.

Positive Youth Development

Youth development is a broad notion that reaches into a number of fields, including developmental psychology, public health, and sociology (Benson, Scales, Hamilton, & Sesma, 2006). This construct has been described as having three distinct, but related, facets: a natural process of development, a set of principles, and intentional practices (Hamilton, Hamilton, & Pittman, 2004). Human beings' positive growth is a natural process through which adolescents develop the increased ability to comprehend and act upon their environments. As a set of principles, youth development promotes

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initiatives that enable young people to thrive within their environment. Further, the initiatives aimed at positive development are inclusive for all youths and function on a strength-based framework. These principles recognize that some children require treatment (i.e., deficit, problem-based approaches), while others need preventative measures to promote positive development. The view of youth development as a set of intentional practices provides a means to apply the stated principles in a manner that fosters positive and beneficial development. In addition, youth development embraces the notion that development occurs in various contexts, drawing upon basic tenets of ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1992) and developmental systems theory (Lerner, 1986).

Substantial efforts have been undertaken to operationalize the concept of PYD and tease out its rudimentary components, often with considerable overlap (Benson & Pittman, 2001; Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, & Hawkins, 2004; Damon, 2004; Hamilton, Hamilton, & Pittman, 2004); however, for the purposes of this discussion, the definition proposed by the National Collaboration for Youth Members is used:

> *A process which prepares young people to meet the challenges of adolescence and adulthood through a coordinated, progressive series of activities and experiences which help them to become socially, morally, emotionally, physically, and cognitively competent. Positive youth development addresses the broader developmental needs of youth, in contrast to deficit-based models which focus solely on youth problems. (National Youth Development Information Center, 2007)*

It should be the goal of any youth-serving agency to provide its participants with the appropriate supports, opportunities, programs, and services to aid in the development of fully functional adults. The Shape Up project described in Simovska's (2012) paper provided school administrators and youth workers with a solid framework for carrying out a quality program within a school setting. Through their intentionality in supplying caring and engaged adult leaders who encouraged the participants to become involved in and express their concerns regarding their physical environments, the program administrators helped those in the program become agents of change. This process of change, which occurred within the students' physical surroundings as well as within each participant, exemplifies the goal of PYD programs to extend beyond deficit-based approaches, in this case the reduction of obesity and the promotion of a healthier lifestyle, and aid participants in developing self-efficacy through personal and social growth.

Research in Positive Youth Development

Research within the field of PYD is substantial, although uneven (Benson, Scales, Hamilton, & Sesma, 2006). Early efforts in the field centered on societal concerns reflecting specific points in time (e.g., illicit drug use among adolescents, crime rate among those under the age of 18) and the effects youth programs had on these issues. While some positive effects were found in exploring the potential impact of youth initiatives, further research revealed most programs produced fleeting results (Connell, Gambone, & Smith, 2000), leading professionals to suggest that studies focusing on status outcomes may be ill-equipped to capture the intricate interactions within the program and resulting development of the individual (Lerner, Freund, De Stefanis, & Habermas, 2001).

Despite empirical evidence backing the developmental benefits of youth-program participation, researchers soon realized little was known about what aspects of a program promoted positive development in their participants. Consequently, replicable programs and best practices are sparse within the literature and professional practice. There has been a recent call for more process-centered research that seeks to identify and understand the mechanisms through which positive development takes place (Small & Memo, 2004). It has been suggested that by moving beyond a black-box approach to program evaluation, whereby youths participate in a program and are magically transformed without knowledge of how the transformation took place, researchers will be able to better identify essential program elements and address those in a purposive manner during future program implementation to more effectively foster positive development (O'Conner & Rutter, 1996). Simovska (2011) references this in her discussion regarding the need for efforts that elucidate program processes as well as programmatic outcomes. As she mentions, initiatives that target health promotion through active participation have shown to have impact in participants' health as well as the development of primary knowledge, health-related competencies, and motivation. However, the issue most often encountered by a youth practitioner or program developer is how these effective environments can be recreated in alternative settings. The research in this project extends the practical and practitioner-focused nature of PYD initiatives by delving into the meanings of intra-program transactions. One of the most viable means to obtain process-centered data and personal meanings associated with beneficial growth is to enlist the voices of those being served.

What is Youth Voice?

Researchers have suggested that the partition between youth participants and adult providers within a program hinges on negative views of youths and assumptions made by adults regarding youth competencies and capabilities (Camino & Zeldin, 2002). The rationale underlying adult leadership is that adults often "know best" through their extensive knowledge and experience, thus placing them in a position better than that of youths to guide program activities (Larson, Walker, & Pearce, 2005). While appropriate adult supervision is fundamental within positive developmental settings (Eccles & Gootman, 2002), engaging youths as active participants in their own development through their input and effort plays an equally vital role.

Youth voice has become a term encompassing a range of ideas, from perspectives on social issues (Anderson, Evans, & Mangin, 1997) to associations with courage and expression (Rogers, 1993); however, several salient features of youth voice are present in most definitions. For purposes of this discussion, *youth voice* is defined as a young person's ability to conceive ideas and effectively express views through meaningful dialogue. To extend the definition further, youth voice entails the degree to which youths feel their views are heard and respected by others, particularly adults (Ellis & Caldwell, 2005).

Benefits of Youth Voice

The voices of youths are seldom heard within the field of educational research, despite their importance and direct effect on the educational process (Brooker & Macdonald, 1999; Dyson, 1995). There is potential benefit of incorporating voice within youth-development programs (Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, & Hawkins, 2004), but researchers and practitioners rarely engage young people in an effort to elicit their views and opinions on programming. This is vital in the promotion of *participatory democracy*, a term describing a type of initiative that encourages youths to work collaboratively for the betterment of society (Westheimer & Kahne, 1998). It is this type of participation, also termed "genuine participation" by Simovska (2011), that is seen as one of the precursors to personal meaning and individual development.

Youth voice has strong theoretical ties to the concepts of initiative (Larson, 2000) and self-determination (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Initiative and self-determination are two key precursors to youths developing informed opinions and the ability to engage in meaningful discussions. Competencies in effective communication have the potential to foster autonomy and identity within youths (Ellis & Caldwell, 2005), leading to future increases in community and civic engagement. In contrast, young people who do not feel their opinions are valued may become disengaged from the program, and adults in positions of authority may undermine their creative and expressive development (Larson, Walker, & Pearce, 2005). As Simovska (2011) notes, voice plays a complementary role with youth empowerment and participation to create meaningful engagement in youth programs. Simovska also posits that meaningful engagement through genuine participation leads to youth participants who take ownership of the program and are able to effectively act upon their owned knowledge (i.e., using their voice to elicit change).

Empowerment and Youth-Adult Partnerships

After practices have been established for fostering youth voice within a given context, adult programmers must place youths in positions to put action to their voice. Researchers have termed this process of acknowledging and relinquishing power to youth program participants as empowerment (Jordan, 2001). Following positive youth-development approaches, young people become empowered first through being viewed as resources rather than as problems, then through the acquisition of authority and knowledge (Holden, Messeri, Evans, Crankshaw, & Ben-Davies, 2004). As shown by Simovska's (2012) findings, the Shape Up project was intentionally designed to empower its youth participants. Further, the research found that Shape Up resulted in participants feeling a strong sense of ownership regarding the program, which led to increases in motivation to elicit change, feelings of self-efficacy through achievement, and more positive views of self-confidence. Similar programs seeking to empower youths have been shown to positively influence youth-identity development (Chinman & Linney, 1998), self-confidence (Larson & Wood, 2006) and, more distally, community participation (Zeldin, 2004). As the definition of empowerment suggests, empowering youths is not something that occurs via a single decision; rather, it is an intentional process involving interactions between youths and adult leaders characterized by mutual respect and genuine concern.

Youth-adult partnerships have become key strategies within the fields of community building and youth development; however, research exploring this construct's core components and potential factors is lacking (Camino, 2000). Youth-adult partnerships, when carried out with an intention to foster developmental outcomes, have strong potential to positively influence youth participants and adult leaders as well as foster program improvement.

The notion of youth-adult partnerships has evolved from Lofquist's (1989) original classification of adult attitudes used within the fields of prevention science and youth development, to more recent additions by both researchers and practitioners. Initially, Lofquist posited that adults view youths as simply objects within a program, recipients of adult-driven initiatives, or resources that can be used to achieve adult-determined objectives. More recently, youth professionals have added that, in most cases, young people should be viewed as partners, suggesting that youths have the right to develop and exercise decision-making power within programs and activities (Camino, 2000). Further synthesis of the youth-adult partnership construct describes these relationships as best practices yielding optimal opportunities for youths to engage in decision-making processes (Zeldin, Camino, & Mook, 2005). Collaborative efforts between adults and youths do not solely entail views and attitudes between these two actors but incorporate contextual elements as well, including program atmosphere and community characteristics.

Youth Engagement and Enduring Involvement

Environments that are developmentally appropriate for participants have a higher likelihood of promoting full engagement and results as desirable outcomes. *Youth engagement* is defined as "the meaningful participation and sustained involvement of a young person in an activity" and results when individuals are behaviorally, affectively, and cognitively impacted through their participation (Pancer, Rose-Krasnor, & Loiselle, 2002, p. 49). From this definition, two terms merit further discussion: *meaningful participation* and *sustained involvement*.

There is nothing particularly inherent in youth programs or organized activities that explicitly produces positive development. A child will not necessarily manifest the traits of a fully functioning and capable adult by simply participating on a youth sports team, creating a sculpture, or singing a solo in a choir. Activities only provide a context that can positively influence the participant if they are properly structured and supervised. To this end, researchers have developed the theory of developmental intentionality, which posits that attention must be given to "the dynamic relationship between developmental outcomes, youth engagement, and intentionality in the philosophy, design, and delivery of program supports and opportunities for young people" (Walker, Marczak, Blyth, & Borden, 2005, p. 399).

The theory of developmental intentionality is based on three constructs: intentionality, engagement, and goodness of fit. Intentionality entails the use of deliberate and strategic decision making to ensure that program planning and adult-youth

interactions consider long-term development important. The developers also suggest that, while programmatic goals may originate from adult-driven means, truly dynamic change is enhanced when youths are engaged as active participants in their own development and viewed as collaborators in program planning. Finally, the theory argues that using an intentional approach maximizes the probability of a good fit between the participant and the program. Additionally, increases in the degree of fit create a high likelihood of increases in the level of youth engagement.

Higher levels of youth engagement, driven by factors such as youth voice and meaningful participation, have been empirically linked to increases in the degree of participation (i.e., participation intensity) as well as the duration of involvement (i.e., participation continuity; Hansen & Larson, 2007; Pittman, 1991). Contemporary researchers have discovered that the amount of time youths participate in organized activities each week (Simpkins, Ripke, Huston, & Eccles, 2005; Zarrett, 2006) and their stability of participation across adolescence (Zaff, Moore, Papillo, & Williams, 2003) have influential roles in how participation is related to youth development. Other studies have found that transient participation in an organized activity does not promote beneficial growth in outcome areas such as school achievement, prosocial behavior, and civic engagement to the same degree as does more sustained involvement (Mahoney, Cairns, & Farmer, 2003; Zaff et al.).

Conclusion

Youth programmers need to consider a holistic approach to exploring activities as potential developmental contexts. In gaining an understanding of the positive growth potential within these settings, studies must examine activity processes, relationships, and learning environments. One the most valuable methods for discovering and interpreting the transactions within a given context is to engage key participant stakeholders as active partners in design and research. Ensuring that those who stand to benefit are presented with situations, expectations, and challenges that are realistic and reasonable is vital to the success of any initiative (Orlick & Botterill, 1975). Allowing individuals to have a voice in their participation and administering programs from a child's-eye view provides youth programmers with an important tool for cultivating meaningful relationships between program stakeholders.

The same holds true of our education system; this setting is fertile ground for cultivating meaningful relationships between programmers, teachers, and students. Unfortunately, very few programs and institutions implement true democratic education, and many parents, educators, and policymakers see participatory democracy within our education system as a very dangerous prospect (Biesta, 2006; Perry, 2009). Promoting this type of student involvement does carry with it an implicit responsibility on the part of the agency. As Benjamin Barber (1994) suggests, democratic participation is not something that is naturally occurring; rather, it is something that requires purposive effort and significant work. The fruit of this labor, however, is helping develop young people who are effective change agents and who relish taking ownership of their own development.

As Simovska's (2012) findings in this case study suggest, when given the proper supports and opportunities within a program, youths can act as effective agents of change and have the ability to take ownership of their positive development. "Doing it for the kids" is an oft-heard phrase within many youth programs. As such, it is vital to the continued improvement of program effectiveness and development of best practices to enlist the voices of those closest to the program. Another important finding relative to voice within Simovska's study is the lack of ownership displayed by the teachers. Often, the youth workers interacting directly with children are seen as passive players in program delivery. One of the most important keys to programmatic success is the commitment to and full engagement in the delivery of services. Future research that replicates the process-centered focus of this study is needed to explore the meaningful transactions that lead to positive development, if similarities can be drawn between contexts (e.g., health-promotion, after-school programs, youth sports), and how we can maximize these findings to promote positive developmental opportunities for our young people.

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